

Short Story

The Pipe

By Mandy Bradcliff

Esmie braced herself as the rusty four wheeled drive bounced along a cratered trail adjacent to the pipe.

'Horace' as she called it ran the length of Alaska and then some carrying oil to the somewhat newer gas-guzzlers down south. It was late fall and even with the heater blowing she needed several layers to ward off the freezing air.

A couple of hours into her wilderness drive and she always went into a kind of dream. No one to talk to and the now familiar landscape of snow, snow covered pines and of course Horace – also snow covered. Esmie's mind drifted and she ruminated on how her old man was going to get to her place this Christmas, what they would have to eat, a whole bunch of things. Then there were those recurring thoughts about how vulnerable she was out here alone, miles away from civilization. She was pretty much on mental autopilot when she saw the dark mass on the trail ahead.

"Damn.... probably a deer strike, here we go!"

Hitting the brakes hard on this surface just wasn't a good idea so her cold feet instinctively dabbed at the brake pedal until the vehicle slid to a halt feet from the obstacle. The trouble was, the closer she got, the more she realized that this was no deer.

Slightly panicking, Esmie climbing down from the relative comfort of her vehicle into the freezing air and hurried, as much the slippery surface allowed, towards the curled up figure of a large person lying in the middle of what was laughingly called a road.

"You OK?"

Nothing.

She reached down and gently rocked the man by his shoulder. A bushy beard impregnated with snow gave away his gender.

"You OK?"

There was a groan and her heart raced.

"Hey, talk to me will you?" She shook a little harder now balancing most of her weight directly over him.

What happened next took her breath away. In a single movement he rolled over and grabbed Esmie's arms pulling her down on top of him with the power of grizzly bear. His eyes were wide now and there was no mistaking his intention. Esmie struggled but he just gripped harder and rolled her over so she was under him and pinned down by his weight. She screamed but he laughed exhaling the alcohol fumes on his breath. He began to fumble at her clothes.

“What’s up, don’t you want a bit fun my lovely one?”

“Let me go you bastard!” She shuffled her body upwards to be sure what she would do next had the desired effect and sure enough, moments later, she was free of his grip. The yell he let out as her knee found its target filled the deserted mountain air for miles around and seemed to reverberate in her head. But there was no time to think.

Esmie jumped to her feet and rushed back to her vehicle. Fortunately she’d left the motor running so the heater would still be on. As she slammed the door behind her, the massive figure now with rage in his eyes, grabbed for the door handle. But she was too quick and the lock snapped shut just in time. She hit the pedal and her four wheel drive span off with her attacker still clutching onto the handle. A few swerves later and with the speed increasing he let go and dropped out of sight yelling obscenities.

Breathing a sigh of relief as she put the miles between her and her attacker, she reflected on her foolishness. ‘Why the hell did I stop?’ But Esmie was made of stern stuff, she had to be in her role of pipeline mechanic and, bad as it was, this wasn’t the worst that had ever happened to her.

It was just after mid day when the section of Horace needing attention slid into view. The problem was immediately apparent as black oil could be seen spouting from a join, but unfortunately it was on a high section a couple of hundred meters from the road. She would have to carry her tools.

Lunch called first and as she opened her lunch box and poured a strong coffee from the flask, she rued the fact there was no cell coverage out here and the mountains even prevented a short wave VHF radio from working.

With a couple rolls inside her and revitalized by the coffee, she set about her work. What she couldn’t know was just back around the corner a beat up pickup truck was pulling over and out of it spilled a bearded giant of a man, looking pretty angry.

Esmie was used to being on her own but the thing she liked to rely upon for company was her portable radio receiver, no bigger than a large brick but it could pick up most of the long, and some of the medium wave broadcasts still on air around the mountain communities. The chat show today was typical of her afternoon listening as she crunched along the pipe passing the occasional supporting gantry framework that kept it aloft. She could hear the black fluid pumped through its length above the incessant banter on her radio.

“So just in case you just tuned in, we got Mike Southern with us today. OK Mike, tell us more about this book you’ve written.”

Her feet were freezing now as she approached the gantry nearest the leak and deftly side stepped the oil that poured like a stream underneath Horace.

“Sure pleased you invited me here today Dan, my latest story is a war epic about a GI in Nam who falls for local girl and”

He could see where she was making for and stealthily climbed to the tree line in the high ground above the pipe. Plunging forwards his blood was pulsing and just one thing dominated his obsessive thoughts.

Esmie climbed the gantry holding fast with one hand and hauling up her largest two wrenches and babbling radio in canvas hold-all with her free hand.

“Well nineteen year old Troy eventually makes it back to the US and goes looking for work to keep the two of them.”

“But didn’t you say he had been in Nam for four years, Mike?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Well, wouldn’t that mean it joined up at just fifteen?”

A large grin spread across Esmie’s face. This was why she loved local radio.

“Uh, well I suppose so. Now let me think... No, I mean yes, he lied about his age when he joined up; just wanted to follow in his older brother’s footsteps. Yeah that’s it I remember now, he wanted to avenge his death.”

“But you said he was an only child Mike.”

Esmie slipped on the icy surface of the pipe and nearly fell off she was laughing so much. She regained her balance and cautiously made her way to the spouting joint. ‘This is going to be messy’.

Now directly above her, he blundered down through the tree line to a few meters from the gantry.

The radio went quiet as Mike considered his dilemma, perhaps a bit more preparation before paying to get published? In the pause, Esmie thought she heard a noise in the trees, she glanced around. At first it seemed she was just plain jumpy; ‘probably just a deer, I’m on edge after this morning’. She found a position away from the direction of the oil spurt and fixed a wrench onto the loose bolt.

“Tell you what Mike, let’s have some music while you think about that shall we?” Dan’s, voice was clearly holding back his amusement as he cued Neil Diamond’s ‘Crackling Rose’.

With the second wrench now firmly attached, Esmie sang along as she brought all her weight down on the long lever of the wrench, tightening the nut. The spout subsided, and then eventually ceased altogether leaving just a black, foul smelling slime on the pipe and running down its side. She collected her gear and turned to make her way back but the moment she did, horror struck her.

Tracing a path down from the tree line to the gantry she now faced were footprints in the snow.

He was out of sight below the pipe but she was certain it was him, she froze.

Below the pipe he was biding his time knowing that his prey would soon return to him, having seen Esmie finish the job. He stared upwards, she was taking her time. Esmie’s mind cleared a little, there was no way she was going back, she would have to walk the pipe in the other direction and hope she got to the next gantry before he realized what was going on. Slowly she put down her hold-all and feeling inside for inspiration, she extracted a wrench then turned to walk up the pipe leaving her radio now returning to the interview between Dan and Mike. Her shoes were soft enough not to make a noise on the pipe but she trod carefully to avoid falling.

He could hear the banter now resuming on the radio above but it served only to irritate him and his patience was wearing very thin. 'What was keeping her?' He glanced down from the pipe and was about to attempt a look up at her when he saw his own prints in the snow. 'Had she seen them?'

Frustration boiled over and he stepped out from beneath the pipe to get better view of his prey. She was escaping in the other direction. He charged forwards remaining beneath the pipe where the snow was slightly thinner underfoot.

Esmie reached the next gantry and descended quickly to the ground, still gripping her wrench. She started to descend the snow covered verge towards the trail but in no time at all he was on her. With all her might, Esmie swung the wrench at the head of her crazed attacker but he simply ducked and the momentum made it slip from her hands and it landed several meters away vertically upright in the snow next to the road. She looked at him then the wrench, but it was no longer a wrench she could see. The metal shaft had transformed into a sign post, a sign post with a circular top, warning motorists of deer crossing the trail. The spell was broken and Esmie looked quickly around to confirm there was no attacker before focusing again on the road ahead.

She wondered at her insecurity out here in the wild and hoped for a better dream as she continued to follow the trail of the pipe in her old four wheeled drive, maybe this time she could think about making it big and lots of finding cash to treat her old man – even if it was just a pipe dream.